

The Northbrook public meeting

Report on the public meeting of Tuesday, November 24, 2009, held at the request of the Lee Manor Society, to discuss proposed changes to the design of Northbrook School. The changes involve a red cross picked out in the projecting glass façade, changes to the colour of the render and the installation of ventilation louvers.

The meeting was attended by 35-40 society members and other local residents; council planning officers; the architects; our local councillors, Paul and Sven; Fr Richard Peers, headteacher; Heidi Alexander, deputy mayor, cabinet chair of regeneration. The meeting was chaired by Brian Robson, Lib Dem ward councillor.

Brian said that the red cross had already been approved by the council so that the meeting was formally about the colour of the render and the louvers. But, he added, it would be impossible to exclude the cross from the discussion. This observation proved to be something of an understatement. Brian said he was raising a question in full council about the processes that allowed approval of one conditional element of the design without consultation while requiring it for another.

The architects, a new firm which has replaced the one that steered the application through planning, outlined the reasons for the changes. The lead architect (name was mumbled so I do not have a note) said the reason for the proposed changes in render colour was “to unify the whole building with the frontage.” Clearly, as we have argued, the render and the glass are part of the same enterprise so deserve identical treatment in terms of consultation and approval.

Emma Talbot, the planning officer, attempted to explain the different consultation treatment of the different elements. This was not convincing. The council is clearly in a muddle over this.

I outlined the Society’s objections to the cross – its prominence, garishness and lack of sympathy with its surroundings. I also questioned the process that had allowed to be approved without consultation.

The meeting continued for nearly two hours with frequently angry interventions by residents criticising all aspects of the revised scheme – the cross, render and louvres. Residents also complained about problems with parking while building work is carried out and about working extending beyond the permitted hours.

To cut a long story short, Fr Peers said he would be happy to accept a single Christian symbol on the school frontage though he did not say which one. “One is enough,” he said. “I would be very happy to look at the design. We would not want to cause offence every time you look at it.” Since the red glass cross, rather than the smaller metal/plastic cross and fish symbols, were the subject of our ire, we must assume Fr Peers is willing to remove or modify the glass cross. But we do not know.

Heidi Alexander said – I paraphrase - that given the strength of local opinion, speedy action need to be taken to resolve this issue and that discussions needed to take place.

The architects said that changes would have cost implications.

I said that the Society and other local groups – the Manor House Gardens User Group and NAG – should be involved in any discussions. We did not want the school and the architects to go away, produce another unacceptable scheme, and then ask us what we think. We all have to be involved.

I said that we were only talking about a few pieces of glass so the cost implications of any changes could not be great. And, regrettable though it may be at a time of pressure on public funds, any additional costs are not the fault of the local community.

I feel that we have made some progress on this issue but we have yet to see what concrete proposals emerge and whether they will be acceptable. I feel that, once again, the school and the council have been surprised at the strength of local feeling and the sensitivity of this project. Why does it take them so long to get it?

I would like to thank Brian for chairing a difficult meeting very fairly and all our members and other residents who turned up on a very blustery, rainy evening to give their views. I would also like to thank Fr Peers for his willingness to reconsider his plans and Heidi for indicating her readiness to get something done. We would expect, though, that any changes reflect the local community's clearly expressed views.

The half-built school is already a massive presence on the Taunton Road/ Wantage Road corner and there are still two storeys to go. Its impact will be softened when the exterior finishes are applied and the very limited landscaping possible has been carried out. But it will remain a dominating presence in the conservation area and one that will undoubtedly damage a neighbourhood whose character the Society, local residents and the council have spent more than 30 years trying to preserve.

Charles Batchelor
Lee Manor Society chairman